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A travelling exhibition arranged by the Circulation Department
of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Etchings and lithographs by J A McN Whistler 1834-1903



WHISTLER

LONDON: Victoria & Albert Museum
(Circulation)

1972

Introduction

James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was one of the most important artists working in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. In addition to his mastery in painting he was an etcher of major importance and a distinguished lithographer. This exhibition consists of thirty-two etchings and dry-points, ranging in date from 1858 to 1889, and eighteen lithographs, made either in 1878 or during the years 1890 to 1896.

Whistler was born in New England at Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1843 he travelled with his parents to Russia, where his father practised as a civil engineer. While there he took drawing lessons at the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. In 1848-49 he spent some time in Britain, where his sister Deborah was living in London with her husband, the etcher Francis Seymour Haden, before returning with his mother to the United States after the death of his father in April 1849.

After an unsuccessful period at the West Point Military Academy and, subsequently, in the U.S. Coast Geodetic Survey (where he first practised etching as a cartographer) he returned to Europe in October 1855.

He settled in Paris and came under the influence of Japanese art and the paintings of Velasquez, both highly significant for his art. As a result of a tour in Northern France and Luxembourg in August - October 1858 he produced a set of twelve etchings, now known as 'The French Set'. He was greatly fortunate in meeting the skilled copperplate printer Delâtre, who provided technical knowledge for Whistler and other artists interested in the revival of etching as an artistic medium.

'The French Set' plates (four of which are included in this exhibition, nos. 1-4) are careful and detailed in their drawing and basically naturalistic. In some instances, however, they foreshadow Whistler's later deep concern with light and atmosphere, notably in the 'Street at Saverne' (no. 2).

In May 1859 Whistler moved to London, where he was to spend the greater part of his life. He took rooms in Wapping and began to discover the Thames, not only on canvas but in his etchings. A set of sixteen was eventually published in 1871, now known as 'The Thames Set'. Ten of these are included in

the exhibition (nos. 11-20). Like 'The French Set' they too are naturalistic in approach and still some distance from the calculated subtleties of his later etched work. His choice of subject was, however, unorthodox and original - the wharves, shipping and factories of the Thames.

After the celebrated 'Pot of paint' libel action against Ruskin in 1878 Whistler found himself bankrupt. He had, however, continued his work as an etcher and was commissioned to go to Venice to produce a series of new plates. In November 1880 he returned to London and exhibited the set of twelve etchings now called 'The First Venice Set'. Highly atmospheric and filled with subtle light effects they were criticized as being 'unfinished'. Seven are shown in the exhibition (nos. 21-7).

In 1883 he exhibited in London fifty-one etchings, mostly of Venice, and in 1886 a further set of twenty-six plates was published. This set, now known as 'The Second Venice Set', is represented by four plates in the exhibition (nos. 28-31).

In the Summer of 1889 Whistler went to Holland, and from this period comes the splendid plate entitled 'The Embroidered Curtain' - the only Amsterdam subject included in the exhibition (no. 32).

Whistler made his first experiments in lithography in London in July 1878, just before the Ruskin case came on, and the fine prints 'Nosturne' and 'Early Morning' date from this time (nos. 33 and 34). The other lithographs shown are French and English subjects drawn between 1890 and 1896. In all these prints Whistler succeeded in evoking, with great economy of means, a strong sense of atmosphere and character.

Whistler provided a major impetus to the revival in Britain of both etching and lithography as creative media in their own right, instead of their remaining in debased roles as mere methods of graphic reproduction. A fair representation of Whistler's achievement in both media is provided by the prints in this exhibition.

Grateful acknowledgement is made of the kind loan of certain prints by the Arts Council of Great Britain (nos. 4, 7 and 9), the Trustees of the British Museum (nos. 30, 34, 35, 44, 46, 48 and 50) and the Print Room of the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum (nos. 6, 21, 27, 29 and 31).



Catalogue

- K. = Kennedy, E. G. *The Etched Work of Whistler*, New York, 1910.
 WAY = Way, T. R., *Mr. Whistler's Lithographs*, 2nd ed., London and New York, 1905.

Etchings and dry-points

Four subjects from those published as *Twelve Etchings from Nature* (The French Set), 1858.

- 1 La Rétameuse. (K.14, 2nd state). 1856-58.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.204-1919
- 2 Street at Saverne. (K.19, 5th state). 1858.
Etching. CIRC.749-1968
- 3 La Vieille aux Loques. (K.21, 3rd state). c. 1857.
Etching. CIRC.322-1965
- 4 La Marchande de Moutarde. (K.22, 3rd state). c. 1856.
Etching. A.C.L.19

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- 5 Reading by lamplight. (K.32, 2nd state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.400-1919
 - 6 The Music Room. (K.33, 2nd state). c. 1858.
On coming to England in 1859 Whistler lived for a time with his half-sister Deborah and her husband Seymour Haden, both of whom appear in the etching along with Haden's assistant James Traer.
Etching. G.L.14
 - 7 Nursemaid and child. (K.37, 2nd state). c. 1859.
Etching and dry-point. A.C.L.22
 - 8 Billingsgate. (K.47, 7th state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.601-1968
 - 9 Bibi Lalouette. (K.51, 2nd state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. A.C.L.21
 - 10 Venus. (K.59, 2nd state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.178-1965

Ten subjects from those published as *A Series of Sixteen Etchings of Scenes on the Thames and other subjects* (The Thames Set), 1871.

- 11 Limehouse. (K.40, 3rd state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.15-1912
- 12 Eagle Wharf (Tyzac, Whiteley & Co.). (K.41, only state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. E.3041-1931
Bequeathed by Hans Velten
- 13 Black Lion Wharf. (K.42, 3rd state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. 24767.3
- 14 The Pool. (K.43, 4th state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. 24767.7
- 15 Thames Police. (K.44, 3rd state). 1859.
Also called 'Wapping Wharf'.
Etching and dry-point. 24767.2

16 The Lime-burner. (K.46, 2nd state). 1859.
Etching and dry-point. 24767.9

17 Becquet. (K.52, 4th state). 1859-60.
The sitter was a musician known to Whistler in Paris in 1856 to 1859. The plate was originally used for a view of West Point by another hand. Evidence of its original use appears clearly at bottom right.
Dry-point and etching. 24767.8

18 The Forge. (K.68, 3rd state). 1861.
Dry-point. CIRC.179-1965

19 Old Hungerford Bridge. (K.76, 3rd state). 1860-61.
Etching and dry-point. 24767.6

20 Chelsea Bridge and Church. (K.95, 3rd state). c. 1865.
Dry-point. 24767.16

Seven subjects from those published as *Twelve Etchings*
(The First Venice Set), 1880.

21 The Little Mast. (K.185, 1st state). 1880.
Etching. G.L.15

22 The Palaces. (K.187, 3rd state). 1880.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.638-1968

23 The Doorway. (K.188, 7th state). 1879.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.168-1965

24 The Traghetto (No. 2). (K.191, 6th state). 1880.
Impression taken from the cancelled plate.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.639-1968

25 The Riva (No. 1). (K.192, 3rd state). 1880.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.640-1968

26 Beggars. (K.194, 9th state). 1880.
One of the twenty-two impressions taken by
F. Goulding after Whistler's death to complete the
edition due to the Fine Art Society.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.636-1968

27 The Mast. (K.195, 4th state). 1880.
Etching and dry-point. G.L.16

Four subjects from those published as *Twenty-six*
Etchings (The Second Venice Set), 1886.

28 San Biagio. (K.197, 9th state). 1880.
Etching. CIRC.637-1968

29 Ponte del Piovan. (K.209, 5th state). 1880.
Etching and dry-point. G.L.17

30 The Rialto. (K.211, 1st state). 1880.
Etching. B.M.L.717

31 La Salute, Dawn. (K.215, 4th state). 1880.
Etching. G.L.18

32 The Embroidered Curtain. (K.410, 6th state). 1889.
One of Whistler's celebrated Amsterdam subjects.
Etching and dry-point. CIRC.75-1969

Lithographs

33 Nocturne. (WAY 5). 1878.
Lithotint. E.1517-1905

34 Early Morning. (WAY 7). 1878.
Lithotint. B.M.L.732

35 Gants de Suède. (WAY 26). 1890.
Lithograph. B.M.L.733

36 The Tyre Smith. (WAY 27). 1890.
Lithograph. CIRC.210-1919

37 Maunday's Fish Shop, Chelsea. (WAY 28). 1890.
Lithograph. E.2670-1908

38 The Garden. (WAY 38). 1891.
Lithograph. CIRC.180-1965

39 Draped figure, seated. (WAY 46). 1893.
Lithograph. CIRC.181-1965

40 Nursemaids: Les Bonnes du Luxembourg. (WAY 48).
1894.
Lithograph. CIRC.182-1965

41 The Long Balcony. (WAY 49). 1894.
Lithograph. CIRC.183-1965

42 The Long Gallery, Louvre. (WAY 52). 1894.
Lithograph. CIRC.85-1964

43 The Smith, Passage du Dragon. (WAY 73). 1894.
Lithograph. CIRC.184-1965

44 The Priest's House, Rouen. (WAY 74). 1894.
Lithograph. B.M.L.734

45 The Smith's Yard. (WAY 88). 1895.
Lithograph. CIRC.314-1911

46 Firelight: Joseph Pennell, No. 1. (WAY 104). 1896.
Lithograph. B.M.L.735

47 Little Evelyn. (WAY 110). 1896.
Lithograph. CIRC.741-1968

48 Needlework. (WAY 113). 1896.
Lithograph. B.M.L.736

49 The Thames. (WAY 125). 1896.
Lithotint. CIRC.171-1965

50 St. Anne's, Soho. (WAY 126). 1896.
Lithograph. B.M.L.737